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THE PRIMITIVE ROMAN HOUSEHOLD

BY NORMAN W. DEWITT
Victoria College, Toronto

In days not long before the historical period, when solid Latin and Sabine communities filled the valleys around the Campagna, when the pressure of population was yet unknown and unexhausted soils might still be reclaimed from the forest and the wilderness, before the waters of the Tiber had become familiar to the prying Greek and the venturesome Sicilian trader, one might have seen the Roman household in its prime. At sheltered points, where valleys intersected one another to form crossways (*quadrivia*), or one valley debouched upon another making a fork (*trivium*), where the trails of the beasts of the forest pointed the way to perennial fountains and indicated to the practiced eye of the pioneer the routes of future highways, the hardy fathers would plant their fortified homes. Great bearded men they must have been, brown and muscular, barelegged and bareheaded, the spear ever ready to their hand, surrounded by stalwart sons as they drove the long-horned oxen to the field or harvested the yellow grain in their tireless arms, the unconscious founders of empires yet undreamed. An iron and unquestioned discipline, the precious fruit of living long in some stern environment in other lands before the Italic stocks had descended into the peninsula, still exercised an absolute sway over son and slave, daughter and daughter-in-law, and the lure of the city, the circus, and the market place was a peril unfelt and unfeared. The struggle between the farm and the forum, between industry and usury, between the villa and the palace, had not begun. The anvil and the iron stood ready, but the bolts were yet to be forged.

The farmhouse or villa consisted of a complex of buildings situated in a walled compound like an oriental caravanserai.²

² Varro, *De re rustica* i. 14. The whole chapter is devoted to the fortification of the villa.

Of this plurality of buildings we have evidence in the word *aedes*, which is always plural except when it denotes the house of the god. The style of fortification was not uniform but generally followed the lines of the well-known military camp. The Roman camp, as a matter of fact, was very probably in its origin nothing else than a mobile villa, and it was the lord of the land that taught the art of fortifying to the military expert. In peaceful districts one might content himself with a dead hedge of brushwood and briars, such as one sees about sheepfolds in Europe today, but this sort of barrier, being extremely inflammable, was always exposed to the hazard of chance and the torch of the marauder. A living hedge was better, but for permanence a wall of sun-dried brick or burnt brick was far superior. The ditch and rampart were preferred along highways or rivers and where they aided in drainage. Yet the oldest protection of all was the log stockade such as we are familiar with from the early history of North America, and such as may be seen today in pictures of Siberian prison camps.¹ Varro does not fail to mention this primitive fortification, although it must have been obsolete in his day in most parts of the Empire.

If the mind of anyone is crossed by doubts touching the abundance of timber in early Italy and this particular employment of it, he needs only to be reminded that at a date so recent as the year following the capture of Rome by the Gauls, according to Livy and Plutarch,² the Volscians fortified their camp near Lanuvium with palisades; that the camp of Sextus Caesar near Acerrae in Campania was similarly protected during the Social War in 90 B.C.,³ and that the walls of Aeculanum, a town of the Hirpini, were still built of wood until Sulla burned them down in the same war.⁴ In the light of such incontestable evidence one is almost compelled to picture to himself those old Latins and Sabines as hardy woodmen such as we know well in America. They had also the tools, it must be remembered, for the conquest of the forest and the soil. Italy was the land of iron as well as of wood. There was the Island

¹ Lansdell, *Through Siberia*, II, 240; *Book of History*, II, 687.

² Livy vi. 2. 9; Plutarch *Camillus* 34. ³ Appian *Civil Wars* i. 5. 42.

⁴ Appian *ibid.* i. 6. 51; Pais, *Ancient Legends of Roman History*, pp. 238 ff., enlarges upon the subject.

of Ilva to furnish steel for double axes, whose rhythmic ring must have echoed through the hills of Latium in those far-off winters no less than the notes of the woodman have resounded through the hills of New England in a nearer and dearer antiquity.

That early age of Rome resembled the epoch of the Puritans in New England in two notable ways: it was an age of wood and iron and at the same time of discipline and piety, and wood and iron have no distant connection with discipline and piety. No American lad who has ever heard the voice of a despotic mother calling him from the kitchen door to cut and carry more wood for the insatiable stove will need a commentary on those lines of Horace:¹

et severae
matris ad arbitrium recisos
portare fustes.

And he may well have imagination enough to conjure before his fancy the good old days of a yet more gluttonous fireplace, when family discipline knew not the diluting effects of luxury and comfort. Of these good old days of the Italian farm with a wood lot at the back of it one may catch a glimpse in Virgil now and then, as when he tells of the greed of the farmer, impelled perhaps by the frenzy of war-time prices, to strike low the immemorial homes of the birds:²

aut unde iratus silvam devexit arator
et nemora evertit multos ignava per annos
antiquasque domus avium cum stirpibus imis
eruit.

It is this age of wood and iron, of discipline and piety, that he conceives to have existed in Latium when Aeneas landed with his companions, a rude and virtuous time, whose idle beauty must make way for a more useful, though more arduous and painful, activity; the homeless birds must flee to other retreats, but nature shall reap compensation in glad crops of grain when that virgin soil has been riven by the plow:

illae altum nidis petiere relicitis,
at rudis enituit impulso vomere campus.³

¹ *Ode* iii. 6. 39-41.

² *Georgic* ii. 207-10.

³ *Georgic* ii. 210-11.

This elegiac tone, this sentiment for the grace of a day that is dead, runs all through the later books. The poet himself was born in one epoch, saw revolution, and died in a new world. These last Aeneids are a double requiem, the requiem of a far-off age of gold that was created in his fancy, and at the same time the requiem of a world that his boyhood knew but his manhood had seen to pass away.

To return from poetry to prose, the inclosure in which the farm buildings were situated constituted a *locus sacer*. There was a single passage¹ left in the stockade for exit and entrance and this was guarded. So important for the safety of the household was this gateway that the *vilicus*, in the later days of absentee landlords, was expected to have his cabin close by and himself to see who went out and what he carried. He was aided by dogs who were tied up by day that they might be more fierce by night. If the family lived in the villa then the duty might be assigned to a slave, *ostiarius*. When the Roman family migrated to the city and the door of the house took the place of the door of the courtyard, an important distinction was lost, and the character of the god Janus was obscured. In the Forum alone, which was possibly and probably the courtyard of the royal residence in kingly days, the sacred character of the Janus entrance was preserved.² There too the sacred character of the dwelling is preserved, in this instance the famous *Regia*, and it is quite possible that the little temple of Vesta herself was part of the royal household. In any case the private home was *locus sacer*, whether because Janus was on guard, and gods do not guard profane ground, or because the threshold (*limen*) and hearth were sacred to Vesta,³ or because the store of food was under the care of the penates, or because the dead were originally buried in or near the house,⁴ and all tombs are sacred. In other

¹ Festus, p. 13 (Müll.): *Aedis domicilium in edito positum simplex atque unius aditus*. Servius *Aen.* iv. 200: *Amplius uno exitu in eo esse non oportet, cum ibi sit cubiturus auspicans*. We take the law of the temple to have been the custom of the house, for Servius is speaking of a temple. Varro *De re rustica* i. 13. 2, where it is taken for granted that but one passage is left.

² See *Classical Journal*, XIV (1919), 436.

³ Servius *Aen.* vi. 273: *Vestae limen est consecratum*.

⁴ Servius *Aen.* v. 64: *Sciendum quia etiam domi suae sepeliebantur*.

words the house was a *templum* and, if the Roman at one time in his religious history knew no images and consequently needed no roof beneath which they should dwell, it follows that the private house is the original *templum*.¹ It is there that the divine rites connected with the great occasions of life were celebrated, birth, marriage, and death; and it was in the presence of the divinities there residing that the purity of the family life was created and preserved. The father was a priest, the little girls were vestals, and the boys were the bearers of the sacred vessels and offerings.

The house itself was a highly developed tepee or wigwam and, like the organization of the family itself, had taken shape long before in other lands during a previous stage of civilization. This, of course, is a statement requiring proof, but one may with certainty trace this very development, among the natives of Siberia, from the wigwam to a house that squares to a remarkable degree of precision with our knowledge of the Roman atrium.² Imagine a few poles firmly planted in the ground and leaning together at the top, the whole covered with skins. Then imagine a larger wigwam with poles still leaning inward but not meeting so nearly at the top. Next picture to yourself a rectangle of poles thrust into the ground and furnished with a roof, a hole being left for the smoke to escape, and, what is more important perhaps, for the sky-god to look in. One may find just such a house today, even to the rectangular hole in the roof like the Roman impluvium, in the Kamchatka Peninsula. This, of course, is a long way from Rome, but with all our comparative studies why should we not admit a science of comparative ecology or house lore? Touching the Roman impluvium, few will be content to believe that it existed merely as an inlet for the rain, hardly a desirable thing. It is more likely that the law of the temple pointed to the explanation of the earliest temple, the private dwelling, and the law of the temple

¹ The palace of Latinus is called a *templum* in *Aen.* vii. 174.

² The best pictures I find are in the *Book of History*, II, 647, 665, 650, 654, and 679. The round type is familiar to us from the Vesta Temple, on p. 655. The Kamchatka atrium on p. 679 is particularly remarkable, also the Roman raised fireplace with hollow log for chimney, the predecessor of the brick or stone chimney. See R. J. Bush, *Reindeer, Dogs, and Snowshoes*, p. 174; also Gilder, *Ice Pack and Tundra*, pp. 182, 188, 192.

is plain: *Itaque inde eius perforatum tectum ut ea videatur divum, id est caelum.*¹ How could the guest, for example, the ward of the sky-god, Jupiter, enjoy his protection unless he were in his sight? How could he pray for his protection unless he could behold him? We hold, therefore, that the impluvium had its ultimate origin in the hole at the top of the tepee and survived for the sole reason that it had taken on a religious character.

Within the house Vesta and mother ruled supreme. The truth is that Vesta, though a maiden lady, was a second mother. She was the ethical mother, just as Jupiter was the ethical father. It may have been that she proved a trifle perverse at times when the wind blew down through the impluvium and scattered the ashes all over the room. It may have been that the smoke refused to ascend and, circling round the fireplace and hovering under the roof beams, turned the house all black. When the draft was contrary it would not improve mother's temper, and with smarting eyes she would tell that barefoot boy to step lively after some dry wood and the girls to stop giggling and speed up their spindles. The little vestals had their work to do no less than the older ones. They must get their brooms and sweep up the hearth and they must also be very careful what they said and what they did in the sight of the fire, for the flame-goddess would not take it lightly if evil was done in her sight. There was many a little attention that only good little girls might do for her, and all sorts of misfortunes might come if they proved unfaithful. Mother, as a married person, might not even go into the cellar to bring out the food for the day. The year's supply had been placed under the protection of the penates and it was best for good little girls who had not even heard of evil to take the lid off the great jars and withdraw what grain was needed for the day.² Besides, the mother's hair was done up in coils, and she could not be taking it down every time she went into the presence of the gods. The little girls with their tresses streaming down their backs might go into the holy place at any time.³ As for father and the boys, when they came

¹ Varro *De lingua Latina* v. 66.

² Columella xii. 4.

³ Women were required to let down their hair at funerals and at sacrifices; *Allen's Remnants of Early Latin* No. 168; *Aen.* i. 480; ii. 404; iv. 509; xii. 605; *Plutarch Roman Questions* 14.

in from the barn with their clothes stained from killing hogs, or returned from the war after the summer campaign, they must be particularly careful about what they touched until they were ceremonially purified.¹

However much Vesta may have helped in the discipline of the household there is no doubt that the chief burden fell upon the mother, the *mater familias*. She was the first to arise in the morning and arouse the maids and other members of the household.² She weighed out to the daughters and servants the dole of wool which each must spin that day (*pensum*); she doled out the food to the whole family (originally *mensa* from *metior*); indeed, this function of the mother was so important that her name *māter* may mean "the dealer," which contains the root *mā*, "measure," which is also found in the locative *māne* or *māni*, "at the time of the dole," i.e., "at breakfast time," "in the morning." To return to the mother and her duties, she ruled the house even when sons brought home their wives and little grandchildren began to creep about the fireplace. When at last she fails under her burdens and the eldest daughter assumes the sovereignty of the little kingdom, the possibility of domestic sedition becomes at once acute. If she caught her own little Marcus with vestiges of pilfered food around his lips, it was quite all right to kiss him and call him a naughty *filiolus* and tell him not to do it again, but if she caught her husband's brother's wife's little Gaius pounding her little pet over his classic head with the soup ladle, that promised a different tune, and at once the air would be full of colloquial Latin, which the ladies were said to speak better than the men. The Romans themselves thought it was good old Servius Tullius who settled this knotty point of discipline by devising a neat little pantomime for the Roman ladies which they performed every year in the temple of *Mater Matuta* in the Forum Boarium.³ The chief matron in this rite brought a

¹ *Aen.* ii. 717-20.

² *Aen.* viii. 407-13.

³ Warde Fowler, *Roman Festivals*, p. 154; Plutarch *Roman Questions* 16. We take *maturus* and *matutus* to be doublets and synonyms, both meaning "early rising." The mother is the "early riser." *Maturare* means "to get the work done early." Hence the connection of *Mater Matuta* with deities of the dawn. In the beginning, however, she is, we think, only the idealized Roman mother, a conception of thrift, energy, and discipline. A splendid description of her is given in *Aen.* viii. 407-13.

maidservant into the temple and gave her a box on the ear, which signified her right to administer corporal punishment to slaves. Then she was given bitter medicine to swallow; so far from receiving the right to give her hateful little nephews and nieces what they deserved, she was obliged to pray the gods to bless them.

In treating of the Roman household and the Roman gods we must bear constantly in mind that just as the movements of glaciers through unrecorded time are written in the moraines that leave their tracteries over the surface of the earth, so the efforts of men to work out a practical scheme of life, to lift themselves out of social despair to ethical mastery, leave indelible testimony in their conceptions of the divine. Starting from a principle of this kind we may even presume to understand a being so ancient and remote as Jupiter himself, the god of faith and honor, the divine protector of the stranger and the wayfarer, the patron of the subordinate and dependent man. His origin lies in a time far anterior to the cosmopolitan Graeco-Roman household of Cicero's day; anterior to the era of small independent landowners that prevailed until the terrible cataclysm of the Hannibalic wars swept over Italy; anterior to the age of the kings who raised to power and prominence the plebeian city of artisans, merchants, sea captains, and adventurers in the snug retreat beside the Tiber. In the valleys around the Campagna we might perhaps have found a state of society in which the finishing touches were added to the lofty conception of the sky-father. He is the heavenly analogue of that chieftain of the type of the first Appius Claudius,¹ the powerful *pater* who migrated to Rome surrounded by a vast horde of clients so bound to him by the nature of the society in which they lived that no tolerable life was possible without his friendship and protection.

In some prehistoric age, when the organization of the clan was being worked out around the fortified domiciles of the chieftains, the conception of the highest divinity was also evolved. Men lift themselves up by creating gods. The gods are testimonies to the highest aspirations of men. Just as the ancestor of the Roman beheld in the seven stars that circle round about the pole the image

¹ Suetonius *Tiberius* 1; Livy ii. 16. 4.

of the oxen that go round about the circular threshing floor,¹ so he saw in the stars that range over the surface of the heavens the sheep of the sky-shepherd, the sky-father,² for *pater* and *pastor* are probably one and the same word, the later formation being based upon a false division of *pasco*, of which the true root is found in *pa-ter*. At one time in his history the Roman might truthfully have said, "The Lord is my shepherd." "He telleth the number of the stars and calleth them all by their names," said the Hebrew of more prolific fancy, but the forebear of the Roman had the same conception, if more thinly elaborated. The *pater* is not the physical father; he is the ethical father just as Vesta is an ethical mother. The true and primitive Roman Jupiter is the parent of no child, but he is the father of his people, just as Vesta is the parent of no child but the mother of the little vestals. In such purely ethical creations of that remote religious experience we have eloquent and deathless records of the origins of the purity of Roman family life and the sanctity of the father's witnessed word, his oath. They carry us far back into an immemorial past, when the bold leader of the *gens*, moving in the fierce light that beats upon the life of him who would be first among his fellows, forged the morals of Rome upon the anvil of hard experience, creating noble habits in himself through the inescapable necessities of leadership, discovering a higher self in himself and a higher conception of his god at the same moment and in the same process. As the fiercest heat is existent at the center of the solar system, so the greatest virtue is born and maintained, not in the margins of society, but at its vortex, where the tug and strain of moral forces exert all their tension at a single point. It is there that godhead itself comes into being, whether it be the ideal purity of the chieftain's daughters, personalized in Vesta, or the sanctity of the father's plighted word, personalized in Jupiter, the sky-father, the wrathful protector of his earthly children, the heavenly counterpart of the proud and truth-speaking master of the clan community. The

¹ *Septemtriones*, "seven threshing oxen." Varro. *De lingua Latina* vii. 74, 75, strikes a warm scent.

² *Aen.* i. 608, *polus dum sidera pascet*; Lucretius i. 231, *unde aether sidera pascit*. Philosophy spoiled the fancy.

world owes a most precious heritage to these far-off aristocracies. Democracy, from one point of view, is but the reaching up of the common man for the virtues of his chief, the plebeian warring upon the patrician, the servant demanding the privilege of adopting his master's gods. Happy is the race that, having started rightly, is permitted the fruition of its composite aspirations, the common groping after gods! The Roman found the way that led to righteousness and went far upon that way, but was turned into another path before the end by irresistible influences. It was not the mission of Rome to give the world a religion. The Roman household, rich as its contribution was to public and private morality, to lofty, ethical relationships, was left, after all, a truncated experiment, an unfinished experience, an almost tragic example of the recklessness of that *Fors Fortuna* who presides over the destinies of races. Fortunate are we who can perceive at this distance in time that the Fates or Providence, by whichever name we prefer to call the power that directs the main movements of mankind at large, were only laying down in the virtues of that Roman household cyclopean foundations for colossal political superstructures, the consummation of human endeavor in Mediterranean lands, the end of the first stage in the recorded ascent of man.